

# BUILDING A SOCIAL FORCE FOR PROGRESSIVE CHANGE

THE GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING SECTOR  
AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM



**WE** are at a crossroads. We face both a social and ecological crisis that calls for a fundamental transformation of our society. And it will require a broad social movement, like those led by labor in the 30s and civil rights activists in the 60s, to create the change that is needed. The foundation for such a movement is emerging, cemented by national organizing networks, academics, media shops, think tanks, and electoral and advocacy organizations. The key piece that is missing is a stronger, bigger, and more militant social force on the ground, rooted in communities across the country, that can provide the power and pressure needed to drive change. But we are closest we have been to building that type of organized base since the 60s.

Over the past four decades, hundreds of community-based organizations have taken root and grown throughout the United States, responding to local needs and conditions. These grassroots organizations (GROs) have been engaged in the difficult, essential task of building a force for fundamental change, community by community, workplace by workplace, around a set of core progressive values—democracy, immigrant rights, workers rights, racial and gender justice. And they have achieved major local, state, and national policy changes in environmental justice, housing, economic development and education. GROs practice four key elements essential to developing the powerful progressive force for change needed today:

- **Building local power:** GROs develop indigenous leadership and institutions and promote genuine participation and democracy in organizations.
- **Developing scale based on values and vision:** Over the years GROs have created regional and national vehicles to build bridges and political strength among organizations, movements and sectors, e.g., Jobs with

Justice, Right to the City Alliance, Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, National Day Laborers Organizing Network, and the Indigenous Environmental Network.

- **Integrating electoral organizing to build power:** There have been numerous attempts to build a progressive political movement aligned with the values and goals of the grassroots sector, independent of the two major political parties. Building off the lessons of previous attempts, GROs like the Push Back Network, Southern Echo, and ALLERT, are re-engaging this realm as a strategy to build new bases and power.
- **Bridging sectors and increasing coordination:** Since the beginning of the new millennium, we have seen key developments in the evolution and maturation of this sector, in particular new networks and alliances that are beginning to bridge issue silos and forge strategic relationships with other sectors. For example, the Inter-Alliance Dialogue (IAD) unites the Right to the City Alliance, Push Back Network, Jobs with Justice, the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, the National Domestic Workers Alliance and the National Day Laborers Organizing Network to coordinate, build movement infrastructure and impact national policy.

**The challenges ahead are clear. GROs need to continue building bases that are both wide (numerous) and deep (committed), in addition to be networked across geography and able to mobilize quickly. Communications and technology capacity needs to be increased. And most importantly, GROs need vast increases in resources because the fundamental transformation this moment calls for will not be attained through incremental gains.**

# BUILDING A SOCIAL FORCE FOR PROGRESSIVE CHANGE

## THE GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING SECTOR AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM

### MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF OUR TIME

As we enter the second decade of a new millennium it is clear that we who inhabit the Earth are facing a major crossroads in our history. The world is experiencing a generalized crisis with many faces: capitalism, the world's dominant economic system, and the ecology of the planet are both in the midst of major, fundamental disruptions and the future of both is in question. The excesses of capitalism over the past 3 decades and the destruction of ecosystems caused by climate change are causing deeper and more widespread poverty, displacement, shortages of food and natural resources. National and local governments are increasingly unable or unwilling to meet the demands of populations falling deeper and deeper into crisis. Fear and want has emboldened and fostered the rise of radical racist and xenophobic movements that are gaining a foothold in the political arena of several countries.

The stakes are higher and more urgent than ever for societal transformation on a global scale that will alleviate wide-scale suffering and reverse the assault on the Earth's well-being. It is becoming increasingly clear that the vision and bold action necessary for the change we need is not being generated by political leaders of industrialized nations or market forces. It will depend on people of conscience throughout the world standing together and taking matters into our own hands. The broad based Global Justice Movement (GJM) that emerged in the late 1990s has proven to be one critical force in the turbulent first decade of the new millennium. Through mass, militant mobilizations, millions of people stemmed the tide of corporate-dominated trade, economic

hegemony and militarism that have triggered the generalized crisis. The movement now is turning its focus to climate change and defining peoples' led alternatives to development.

In the U.S. what are the forces and movements that will step into this new era of historical challenge? Who will be the actors that will be part of the global process of demanding a new progressive transformation?

### SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE U.S.: WHERE WE ARE

John Cavanagh of the Institute for Policy Studies has noted that there were two 2-year periods in the past 100 years where significant national progressive legislative changes happened in the United States: 1936-38 and 1964-66. Both of those moments shared one important trait: giant, militant and disciplined social movements. In the 1930s labor movements led the way to the creation of workers rights laws, accountability of the financial sector and a social safety net—forging a new pact with the state and industry. In the 1960s the civil rights movement inspired radical activism and policy changes aimed at dismantling the legal legacy of slavery.

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We believe that the foundation for strong social movement exists in the U.S. today, but a number of factors will determine if it can be coalesced into a sustained, transformative force. The infrastructure for progressive social change work is not coordinated in any manner. For example, there are organizing networks, research arms, academics, communications experts, policy and think tanks, electoral and advocacy organizations. However, each does work in the context of a particular approach, sector, issue area, or community. Within the left to center political spectrum differences in analysis, approach and goals of different institutions have made it difficult to achieve coordination even within sectors.

## **WE NEED TO BUILD A SOCIAL FORCE ON THE GROUND, ORGANIZED IN LARGE AND SMALL POCKETS ACROSS THE COUNTRY, WITH REAL STRATEGIC COORDINATION CAPACITY**

The policy disappointments following the election of President Obama have raised a fundamental question: Where is the social force that will drive a national progressive agenda today? We need to build a social force on the ground, organized in large and small pockets across the country, with real coordination capacity. A new level of coordination and collaboration, within, across and beyond sectors is also necessary in order for progressive change of any scale to take place. Herein lies the power we need.

Today we may be seeing the seeds of renewed radical activism and social movement in the

U.S. The response to the legalization of racial profiling in Arizona by the State Legislature has sparked a broad-based and immediate response. Students have taken action – chaining themselves to the Arizona State Capitol building, grassroots immigrant rights organizations have blockaded police buses transporting immigrants for deportation, city councils in several cities have passed laws to boycott economic relationships with the state of Arizona. Even sports figures and celebrities have publicly denounced the law. Thousands of people also recently took to the streets around the country to demand accountability of banks and investors for the speculation and fraud that triggered the global economic crisis of 2008. Will these events and actors continue to evolve and consolidate into a social force that can provide leadership for significant and transformative change?

### **THE GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING SECTOR: BUILDING UPON OUR HISTORICAL LEGACY**

Many of these events are happening spontaneously, through the initiative of a variety of individuals and organizations hailing from different sectors of society. Many of the efforts, however, are being driven by community and worker-led organizations who have built grassroots infrastructure, relationships and electoral power for generations.

Over the past four decades, hundreds of community-based organizations have taken root and grown throughout the United States. Responding to local needs and conditions, many of these grassroots organizations (GROs) have become dynamic vehicles to empower poor and working-class people. GROs have been engaged in the difficult, essential task of building a social force for progressive change, community by community, workplace by workplace around a set of basic progressive values—democracy, immigrant rights, workers rights, racial and gender justice. They have achieved major local, state, and national policy changes in environmental justice, housing,

economic development and education. GROs have highlighted the importance of voice and participation, emphasizing the leadership potential at the grassroots, and promoting genuine participation and democracy in our organizations.

## **GROs HAVE BEEN ENGAGED IN THE DIFFICULT, ESSENTIAL TASK OF BUILDING A SOCIAL FORCE FOR PROGRESSIVE CHANGE, COMMUNITY BY COMMUNITY, WORKPLACE BY WORKPLACE AROUND A SET OF BASIC PROGRESSIVE VALUES...**

Much of the leadership of the GRO sector has personal and political roots in the rich legacy of some of the most important U.S. movement traditions:

- First, the activist movements of the 60s and 70s—civil rights, anti-war, and identity movements of African American, Chicano and Latino, Native American and Asian American peoples for self-determination--produced a large number of activists who were connected beyond their own organizations to expanding visions of broad social change, developing a deep political understanding of social and economic forces, and connecting local issues to a global context.
- Second, the growth of feminist and queer movements played a key role in shaping a

“new analysis”—a strengthened understanding of the intersection of the roles, issues and needs of women as leaders and activists, the complexity, richness and diversity of gender identity, and the emergence of struggle against all forms of sexism and homophobia within the environment of the social justice movement as well as the broader society.

The dynamics of the movement during this period, especially civil rights and other identity movements strengthened the core tradition of base building: a focus on genuine organizing (door-to-door, face-to-face), and building member based and driven organizations. Organizations built depth in communities, long successful histories of advocacy, combined with service provision and militancy, often under the same roof. Grassroots organizing was not just organizing individuals around issues, it was about organizing communities for the long-term.

## **AND WE ARE ORGANIZING STRATEGIC RESPONSES TO THE CRITICAL DEMANDS AND INTERSECTIONS OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY.**

GROs today employ a variety of strategies and models of organization building, each unique to their local conditions and experiences. Although GRO models vary greatly, there are some key common traits.

- We are committed to building a membership base and local power. This distinguishes us from policy and advocacy organizations. Our emphasis is to develop political leadership and democratic process. Most of our organizations

are multi-racial and strive to build democratic, anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-homophobic institutions. We reject the notion that broad-based political unity can be built upon a “least common denominator” approach to organizing. We organize based on the values, principles and traditions of our communities and recognize and support the struggles of all oppressed peoples. Highlighting local and participatory values does not make us nimble all the time, but it does make us smart in ways the beltway and other intermediary groups are not in understanding what the needs are and what moves us forward and not backward.

- We are independent and believe in developing indigenous leadership and organizations. We are not part of national organizing networks that ascribe to a single organizing model or methodology. We do, however, form regional, national and global coalitions and networks to achieve greater scale and impact. These coalitions and networks are governed by our member organizations – not convened by intermediaries.
- We are organizing strategic responses to the critical demands and intersections of contemporary society. For example developing strategic cross-sector/cross-demographic organizing models that bridge Black-Brown (African-American – immigrant) communities, bridging the gulf between labor and community, and extending linkages between local organizing and globalizing phenomena.
- And we have not situated our transformative work in either of the major political parties, but have largely operated external to these, as both a base of support on liberal issues and a force of critique for more progressive policy.

## **GROs SUPPORT THE CREATION OF A SOCIAL FORCE FOR PROGRESSIVE CHANGE IN FOUR KEY WAYS:**

### **1) Strengthening the Local Force for Social Change-Developing Leaders**

Several organizations have founded schools for developing the political education and consciousness of their members including Power University and the College of Leadership designed by POWER U of Miami to build the leadership skills of young people, and the Labor/Community Strategy Center’s National School for Strategic Organizing in Los Angeles. Community Voices Heard (CVH) in New York and Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Development (SCOPE) of Los Angeles have published organizing manuals that provide organizing skills and political education tools. The sector also draws from leadership resource organizations like the School of Unity and Liberation in Oakland, CA and the Social Justice Leadership Transformative Organizing Institute in New York.

### **2) Creating the Space for Broad National Convergence Based on Values and Vision**

Over the years GROs have created regional and national vehicles to build bridges and political strength among organizations, movements and sectors. Jobs with Justice (JwJ), was established in the 1980s as a national network of local coalitions built by labor, faith-based, community and student organizations to win workers rights struggles. More recent collaborations include the Right to the City Alliance, formed to fight for housing and development rights for inner-city poor and working people, the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance (GGJ), which connects U.S.-based grassroots organizations across issues and movements and links them to international social movements. The National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights and the National Day Laborers Organizing Network bring together immigrant constituencies to fight against repressive immigration policies. Groups like the

Indigenous Environmental Network continue the legacy of environmental justice networking at a national and global level.

These networks formed the backbone of the United States Social Forum (USSF) organizing process. The USSF brought together hundreds of GRO organizations with labor, environment, peace and justice and other sectors to build a new generation of movement relationships under the banner, “Another World is Possible, Another US is Necessary.” The first USSF in Atlanta, GA in June 2007, was a significant achievement – creating a space for convergence of over 12,000 participants across movements, geography, race and culture.

New innovations and initiatives were born through the USSF, including the National Domestic Workers Alliance, encompassing 30 domestic worker organizations in 8 cities, the Southern Strategies process organized by Highlander Center that convenes organizations from the Southeast and Appalachia to share and collaborate on organizing strategies, the South-by-Southwest collaborative organized by Southwest Organizing Project (New Mexico), Southern Echo (Mississippi), and Southwest Workers Union (Texas), uniting grassroots leadership to share the rich history of struggle across these regions and forging state strategies to build power.

### **3) Integrating Electoral Organizing with Long-term Power-building**

There have been numerous attempts to define and build a progressive political movement aligned with the values and goals of the grassroots sector, and independent of the two major political parties. Most have been unsuccessful, though not without some fruit. There have been popular uprisings within the Democratic Party, most notably those focused around Jesse Jackson, Shirley Chisholm and Fannie Lou Hamer. We have seen pockets of independent politics expressed by the Green Party and the Working Families Party in NY which align somewhat with our politics. The Push Back

Network, formed in 2005, combines many of our organizations across eight states with the explicit goal of enhancing our participation as a sector in the electoral arena, and integrating electoral work with long-term strategies for winning. Its member organizations have been developing capacity in field and voter turnout, voter ID, and database management as tools for long-term base building.

The Alliance for Local Leaders for Education, Registration and Turnout (ALLERT) has developed sophisticated community-based infrastructure for political power in South Los Angeles, building capacity to mobilize over 140,000 voters in poor communities of color, (most of them new and infrequent voters) to engage consistently in local, state and national elections. ALLERT is part of the California Alliance, a broader statewide effort to build political power in key under-represented communities across California.

For two decades Southern Echo has developed a popular approach to engage community leaders in the census and redistricting process of Mississippi. This has paved the way for unprecedented numbers of African American leaders to be elected to office in the state. Southern Echo is now partnering with groups in the South-by-Southwest collaborative to advance a “community governance” agenda - organizing communities to reclaim democratic power and self-determination from corporations and other external forces.

### **4) Building Relationships for Strategic Collaboration on a Progressive Agenda**

Since the beginning of the new millennium, we have seen key developments in the evolution and maturation of this sector, in particular new networks and alliances that are beginning to bridge issue silos and forge strategic relationships with other sectors. This includes the Inter-Alliance Dialogue (IAD) which unites the Right to the City Alliance, Push Back Network, Jobs with Justice, the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, the National Domestic Workers Alliance and the

National Day Laborers Organizing Network in a process to coordinate, build movement infrastructure and impact national policy. The IAD presents us with incredible potential toward realizing a number of capacities needed to strengthen this sector. The combined assets of the IAD represent hundreds of thousands of members and supporters, hundreds of paid staff, including organizers, media strategists, fundraisers and logistics support.

## TOWARDS A U.S. MOVEMENT RENAISSANCE

While just one part of a diverse and elaborate social justice ecosystem, GROs have a critical role to play in winning progressive social change in the United States and should be supported to do so. There are a few key strengths particular to these organizations, including:

- The ability to draw upon a diversity of tactics and form,
  - Positioning to offer a direct bridge between the highly localized experience at the community level and the national political and policy arena,
  - Desire, ability and experience collaborating with a range of social actors, from local service organizations to government agencies,
  - Long-term vision beyond the transactional, short-term wins that can be undone from one administration to the next
  - Flexibility and experimentation—as a result of having smaller institutionalized structures, key in a time when the political landscape changes on a rapid basis,
  - Historical and global analyses—bringing in community history as well as political economic history and a global perspective, key in an era when all organizing is local, national and global in its implications,
  - Ethnically and culturally diverse constituencies.
- The potential of the GRO sector is tremendous but how it can reach a new phase of development

to meet the challenges of the millennium is a fundamental question. What would it take to achieve and sustain organizing at an effective scale for the long-term? We need the capacity to meet critical objectives:

- Build bigger and stronger bases, maintaining consistent connection and relationships and capacity to act, reach and mobilize quickly
- Consistently see the full court of forces at the national and global level, particularly in the area of national legislation and policy development
- Strengthen our communications infrastructure nationally and internationally, sharing our stories and victories, developing narratives and messages that highlight the work and leadership in our communities,
- Carry out electoral work effectively and consistently—integrating it with base-building

We believe that the foundation to reach these objectives are in place or are in development. GROs have become lasting, vital and recognized institutions in our communities, providing needed infrastructure for community-based power and local democracy. The broader potential of this sector exists in uniting the bases of these local organizations and networks through shared action and dialogue to create strength operating at higher and more potent levels. The establishment of new vehicles for collaboration nationally marks an important next phase for GRO development. It sets the table for organizing unified political strategies at the federal level, and for defeating the persistent forces of racism and reaction at the local and state levels.

We see long-term possibility for a genuine movement with infrastructure for participatory policy development; independent electoral wins; global solidarity and collaboration on transnational issues; a strong popular front against capital; a new U.S. movement renaissance to meet the challenges of a changing planet. ■

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